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Being and Becoming: On Conditions of Existence in the Amazon

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It has now been almost 20 years since the seminal discussion on notions of bodily transformability among Amazonian peoples was initiated between Tânia Stolze Lima (1996) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996, 1998). Since then, accounts of perspectival world views and the corporeal instability of being have become a commonplace within the regional ethnography. However, even though the significance of corporeal transformations in Amazonian peoples' views of the world was increasingly stressed in ethnographical analyses after the publication of Lima's and Viveiros de Castro's articles, the awareness of notions that beings could transform and change physical shape was nothing new at the time of their first exchange (cf. Århem 1990; Baer 1984; Gray 1996; Rivière 1994). The prominent significance given to ideas of bodily transformability during the last decade is most probably a consequence of the dominance of the so called "ontological turn" with its focus on cosmological foundations (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6). Important as this "turn" may be, at the present there are those who find that ontological perspectives have come to dominate ethnographic analysis at the cost of attention paid to, for instance, the lived experiences of everyday practices.¹

With the multiplication of ethnographic studies during the last decades that describe and analyse local notions of the physical body and its transformability it has become increasingly evident that perspectival understandings among Amazonian people probably are greatly varied. Thus in contrast to the assumption of a common Amazonian notion of a monocultural and multinatural world according to which all kinds of beings see themselves as humans and also act as such in a uniform way (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1996, 1998), we are most likely dealing with a variety of comprehensions that all contain elements regarding the inherent transformability of physical bodies.

Even though Amazonian perspectivism immediately concerns the physical body and its transformability, it is the points of view associated with the various bodily forms that are of prime concern. In common with much of recent anthropology the Cartesian dualism is rejected and Viveiros de Castro (1998: 478) adamantly states that Amazonian perspectivism is at "right angles" to the body-soul dichotomy which thus is of little consequence in Amazonian ontologies. The rejection of the Cartesian body-mind distinction requires, though, that the point of view is located within the being somewhere that is neither the substantial materiality of the physical body nor the mind or soul. To tackle this challenge, Viveiros de Castro (1998: 478) introduces an intermediate plane between the physical body and the mind (soul), which he calls "body" (*si*), which consists of a bundle of affections, dispositions, and capacities. This "bundle" he identifies as the origin of perspectives.

Since a bundle is a collection of things held together, Viveiros de Castro's metaphor arguably results in some sense in the objectification of these affections, dispositions, and capacities. That every kind of being perceives the world in the same way – even though the objects perceived may differ² – suggests that the members within each category of being have the same set of affections, dispositions, and capabilities; that is, there is an internal uniformity within each category which Viveiros de Castro (1998: 478) describes as their "habitus" or "way of being."³

The internal homogeneity of the categories of beings suggested by Viveiros de Castro stands in stark opposition to the common notion in Amazonian views of the world that the body serves as a locus of sociality. According to this latter understanding, the corporeal fabrication and development is the result of specific social relations which make every person unique (cf. McCallum 1996; Belaúnde 2001; Vilaça 2002, 2005). This means, in consequence, that the body is continuously formed and honed to meet historically given

expectations and aspirations of the individual. Thus, according to these two perspectives corporeal transformations can be more or less comprehensive, ranging from the development of particular faculties to radical bodily metamorphosis. Although these two notions of corporeality may seem opposed, the focus on the one process does not necessarily mean the rejection of the other. However, to avoid the ahistorical and deterministic perspective on existence that results if homogeneity is stressed, the ways in which persons perceive the world must be considered in relation to praxis and the physical bodies should accordingly be situated in their particular historical contexts. At issue is therefore whether all beings must be seen as culturally alike as Viveiros de Castro assumes or if similar physical bodies still can be considered to allow for distinct and individualized subjectivities.

From the regional ethnography it is obvious that understandings of physical transformability are both common and complex. Given the regional variation, the aim of the present essay is to situate perspectivism and bodily transformability within the more general notion of corporeal instability entertained by Amazonian people. Even though corporeal instability obviously introduces an element of existential insecurity and unpredictability in life, there is more to the idea of bodily transformation as evidenced by those who focus on notions of bodily construction. Individual variations based on, for instance, gender and age as well as sundry idiosyncratic factors should accordingly not be disregarded. To comprehend peoples' experiences and understandings of corporeal transformations, similarities within the same species of being cannot be allowed to eclipse everyday perceptions of physical transformations on a personal level. Accordingly, rather than reducing socially complex relations to just one such as, for instance, predator and prey, I stress the necessity to take into account also the point of view of those only indirectly affected by bodily transformations, and their relation to the one transformed, to understand the significance of ideas of corporeal instability in Amazonian life worlds. Corporeal transformations are not necessarily the result of predatory acts; the Self and persons sympathetic to the Self may intervene in processes of physical alteration to the benefit of the one subjected to such changes. The crucial existential problem among Amazonian people is how to control the multitude of agents in the environment who have the potential to affect, both positively and negatively, the state of being of the Self and of significant Others.

In this essay, I explore Amazonian people's views on corporeal constructions and transformability. Ethnographically my point of departure is Matsigenka people who live in the montaña, or high jungle, of southeastern Peru along the Urubamba and Manu River systems, and among whom notions of bodily change and metamorphosis are prominent in most respects in life. My approach to the ethnography that I present is inspired by the "radical empiricism" elaborated by Michael Jackson (cf. 1996) which means that my point of departure is what people say. Narratives therefore constitute a prominent source of material for the argument and I present a number of Matsigenka myths that illustrate central aspects of their understandings of corporeal transformability. Since the stories always are told from a human point of view, certain inconsistencies or paradoxes in the stories may seemingly appear unless one takes into account that the perception of the world differs between those who are transformed and those who are not since they all see themselves, but not necessarily the other, as humans.

A Transformational Universe

Notions of bodily transformations are not only prominent in Amazonian corporeal conceptions, they are also at the base of a paradox around which many Amazonian people's lives revolve and which is as essential as it is existential. Thus, at the same time as personal changes associated with bodily transformations constitute important events in people's lives, it is frequently noted that people say that they prefer life to be calm and uneventful. One part of this ambiguous attitude is what Aparecida Vilaça (2011: 247) refers to as "the peril of metamorphosis" which means the fear not only of bodily transformation but also, and still worse, of the condition that affected persons can be taken over by enemy beings and turned into one of them. Bodily transformations are, however, not necessarily aggressive acts of predation. On the contrary, an important part of life is directed towards exposing oneself to specific agents whose influences affect the Self in order to develop certain qualities that are deemed important to the social context. Corporeal transformations can thus be intentionally produced by the person affected as well as provoked without prior consent of the one subjected to the changes.

Associated with the relationship between corporeal instability and identity is also the condition of personhood. Following Cecilia McCallum (2001: 91) personhood in the Amazon is neither individual, as in the modern West where each individual is seen as an autonomous and clearly circumscribed entity, nor dividual, as for instance in India and Melanesia where a part of the person is transmitted to others in social exchanges to form a shared substance. In Amazonia, says McCallum, conviviality results in a *blending* into the intimate social circle and personhood is therefore the outcome of a transformative process that is both cumulative and encompassing.

Transformative blending and metamorphosis are accordingly modalities of how the instability of being is conceived and, arguably, both modalities need to be acknowledged in order to understand Amazonian conditions of humanity. To be is not only about existing, growing, and maturing, it is also about belonging. Thus, being is not merely a question of ontogeny; it is also a social state which is underscored by what Walker (2013) aptly describes as “the accompanied quality of existence,” a condition that for every individual is decisive throughout life and beyond. The stress on conviviality means that individual integrity is maintained, which is a vital condition in the many strongly individualistic societies of the region, while, at the same time, intimate sociality remains a defining provision of human existence. A person is accordingly not just a physical entity but a social one and, as Carlos Londoño Sulkin (2012) reminds us, society is an achievement of its members’ continuous interacting. Being and being together are in consequence inextricably linked as existential prerequisites.

While the inhabitants of the world are conceived of as continuously transforming under the influence of a multitude of human and non-human agents who constitute and animate the cosmos and who are indispensable to the understandings of Self, people try to maintain the routines of the everyday where the control of living beings and material objects remain crucial. To successfully maintain control is in this context largely coterminous with notions of the good life that characteristically is both tranquil and stable. The ideal constancy of routine and the predictable is thus set against the actual flux and indeterminacy of being. The “good life,” a notion that is widespread among Amerindian peoples (Asháninka people speak of *kametsa asaike*, Shuar people speak of *penker pujustin*, Miskitu people speak of *pain iwaia*, Quechua speaking people talk of *sumaq kamsay*, etc.), refers to conditions when not only the material needs are satisfied but also where people feel safe and secure without harbouring any fear for imminent social disruption.

Controlled Transformations

Among Matsigenka people, narratives that refer to bodily transformations principally concern what I describe here as “uncontrolled” or externally provoked changes that are not intended by the Self. This does not mean that “controlled transformations” are insignificant or rare; on the contrary, and in conformance with the common notion among Amazon people, the person is understood to be continually in the making (cf. Belaúnde 2001; Londoño Sulkin 2005, 2012; McCallum 1996; Vilaça 2009). The mere condition of being social signifies that people are in frequent contact with other people and thus they mutually influence their development and constitution. Some contacts are of greater importance than are others with the consequence that interaction usually is more intense with these persons. People who live in the same household or often visit each other therefore become increasingly alike as the interaction moulds the parties in a similar fashion – thus, people do not choose to live together because they are similar, they are similar because they live together. It has accordingly been noted that married couples grow closer as the years of their marriage adds on and that with the birth of children, affinity, that is, otherness, becomes less important while consanguinity, or sameness, is increasingly stressed (cf. Overing 2003; Rival 2005; Vilaça 2002; Walker 2013).

To many Amerindian peoples, the life developing within pregnant mothers is not truly human and therefore in need of manipulations in order to develop full humanity (cf. Fortis 2010; Gow 1991; Lagrou 2007; Vilaça 2002). In contrast, Matsigenka people consider the fetuses carried by pregnant women to be human from the start but their pristine state makes them vulnerable and easy targets for influences from all around which may provoke the development of undesired traits and qualities in the babies. Humanity is, accordingly, not a quality that has to be achieved but one that has to be maintained and at this stage of a person’s life this task falls entirely upon the foetus’ social surrounding. In consequence, attention to the personal development begins already during pregnancy when not only the

parents but all members of an unborn's household are attentive to what they do and what they do not do so as to influence the foetus' development in the best possible way. Attentiveness to these matters is of essence since people do not only influence others in a direct manner, they may also serve as transmitters of influences from third parties. Already prior to seeing the light of day, the new being is accordingly part of a convivial project of trust and attention that unites the group that he or she will be born into.

Among the most important measures to influence the physical and mental development of the foetuses is food taboos.⁴ As the character building influences primarily are a consequence of physical proximity rather than of genealogical kinship relations, the entire household is expected to comply with the rules of abstention. Without such precautions, spirits of certain game animals and food plants may provoke the unintended acquisition of physical and mental traits in the unborn that usually are seen best to be avoided. If, for instance, tapir meat is eaten within the household, the unborn is likely to develop an exceptionally big head causing trouble for both child and mother at birth giving; the intake of howler monkey meat makes the child whining loudly, a quality that is not enjoyed by parents, and the consumption of yam can produce stuttering in the child which people commonly consider to be a social shortcoming.

Because of the absolute intimacy between pregnant women and the foetuses they carry, women are affected by these precautions to a higher degree and during the entire period of gestation while other household members are bound by the restrictions primarily when they are in the house in which unborn children dwell. Since the transmission of influences is facilitated by physical closeness, pregnant mothers' mobility is also affected and they are expected to stay close to the house which is protected by plants that prevent demons from entering. In spite of all precautions, pregnant women may have to leave this haven of safety and may then unknowingly be affected by demons, *kamagárini*. In case a woman is thus affected, this will often show only at birth when it is manifested in, for instance, a cleft lip of the baby. Because of the demonic nature of new-borns with such facial deformation, they were formerly instantly killed.⁵

Pre-natal measures are principally of a preventive nature and it is only after birth that measures are taken to develop specific traits and skills. As a child it is principally the parents and elder siblings who are responsible for the deliberate physical and mental development and forming of the little one. Subsequently, as children grow older and advance along their respective life trajectories developing a proper social position, they take on this responsibility themselves. Even though changes are pre-eminently personal they are as a rule related to the social context in which people find themselves. Married people, for instance, consequently strive to improve the skills that allow them more efficiently to perform the gender defined tasks for the nurturing of their families rather than for strictly personal satisfaction.

Since Matsigenka people do not take life to end with physical death, those who feel that their present life is coming to an end often concern themselves with how to maintain relations into the afterlife. Personal transformations are consequently a concern not only during the life time but continue into the hereafter. The fear of growing apart and losing an intimate relationship after one's demise was demonstrated by a widower who married a woman 20 to 25 years younger than he. In spite of the age difference they were very fond of each other and they lived a good life together and had several children. When the man felt that he did not have much time left before he passed on to afterlife, he told his wife that he did not wish her to remarry because in such case he would perhaps not recognize her when they met again since she then would adapt to another person.

Attention to the personal constitution is thus purposeful and in agreement with specific objectives. Since personhood and body are organically linked, transformations in the one will affect the other. The body is accordingly no static "shell" or "envelope" that encases the Self but a component that is formed by, as well as forming, the person with whom it is associated. The design of what Turner (1980) calls the "social skin," that is, the use of adornments and application of paint, scarification, etc., can at times serve as consciously applied means to affect the Self in order to develop certain qualities or skills. With regard to body paint such influences are clearly evident. Thus, that Matsigenka men paint their faces with achiote before going hunting has been explained by the force of attraction that the sweet fragrance of achiote has on the spirit masters of game animals (cf. Baer 1984: 264). It is, however, not only the fragrance of the achiote paste that is important. Before setting out to hunt, achiote is applied according to specific designs which alter the man's physical constitution improving his sight so that he can spot game animals from a

distance. When painted in other ways, the design affects the man differently and, for instance, it may make the wearer brave and invulnerable or persistent and indefatigable but the sight will not be improved. These designs are consequently not merely graphic patterns but also agents that influence the one painted. Designs of this kind are imbued with agential powers and in Matsigenka they are spoken of as “signs that speak” (*sankenari aityo oniake*) (for the Matsigenka see also Renard-Casevits 1980-81: 262; and more generally see, e.g., Fortis 2010; Gow 1996; Guzmán-Gallegos 2009; Lagrou 2007, 2009).

Although the body at times is likened to clothing among Amazonian people, this simile should not be taken in a Western sense as something merely material. Like physical bodies, native clothes are, in contrast to modern Western dress, often intimately linked to the wearer (cf. Gow 2007; Santos-Granero 2009a; Veber 1992, 1996). In accordance with the distinction made by Santos-Granero (2009b), clothes are subjectivized objects, which means that they possess a degree of soul substance but only to the extent that they rely on their owner/wearer to be able to act. With regard to clothes, Matsigenka people moreover recognize a link between producer and product that reminds of what Erikson (2009: 176) talks about as “ensoulment,” that is, the producer leaves a part of him- or herself in the product fabricated. To underscore the close relation between producer and product it is exclusively women in their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters who provide dresses for their relatives and no market for locally produced clothes exists. This means that the locally manufactured *cushma*, the tunic common among many peoples in Western Amazonas, is conceived of differently in comparison to the anonymously produced modern Western dress that is procured from shops and itinerant traders.⁶

Matsigenka *cushmas* may be painted with designs resembling those of their northern neighbours, the Yine (cf. Gow 1999) and Shipibo-Conibo (cf. Gebhardt-Sayer 1985). Commonly, however, the design on cloth is produced by coloured threads in the warp that result in groups of stripes of various widths. In contrast to the unique quality of the paintings, the woven stripes are made according to certain patterns that apparently are common knowledge to women. These designs appear on all locally manufactured textiles and they are known as fish scales, marks of the snake, footprints of the jaguar, etc. Given the standardized quality of the designs they can arguably be seen as synechdochic signs; they represent the fish, the snake, and the jaguar.⁷ Locally produced clothes are thus subjectivized through these designs (Santos-Granero 2009b: 9; see also Guzmán-Gallegos 2009: 231), albeit not in the quantity or quality needed to act on their own. The design does however affect the wearers’ outlook on the world (Rosengren n.d.) and the significance of dress goes beyond simple protective needs.

In contrast to the generally piecemeal character of controlled change, there also exist means through which radical transformations are produced; the use of psychoactive substances such as ayahuasca and brugmansia allows, for instance, the one who takes them to separate the soul from the body so that the person gain access to otherwise invisible dimensions of reality (Rosengren 2006b). During shamanic séances, the shaman’s soul leaves the body for the world of the spirits and in a process of metempsychosis the body is taken over by one of the shaman’s spirit helpers. Using ayahuasca is not limited to shamans though. In practice, all men ingest psychoactive substances, but ordinarily it is done under the expert guidance of seasoned shamans who know their way through the various dimensions of the world and who can lead their fellow travellers safely to the dwellings of friendly *saangarite* spirits.

Psychoactive substances are not only employed to visit other dimensions of reality. There are techniques that allow the one who ingests ayahuasca to turn into a jaguar. Usually this measure is limited to shamans who employ the drug to this end in order to act in this world rather than visiting their spirit helpers. In the body of the jaguar, shamans make use of the animal’s strength, agility, and cunning to attack enemies or to obtain information. When ordinary men⁸ take ayahuasca in order to transform into jaguars, they do it alone and in secrecy since their purpose is malicious. According to stories told, those men who turn themselves into jaguars may be overtaken by the feeling of power that the feline body gives them to the extent that they transform themselves over and over again. Repeated transformations are dangerous since the one who excessively turns himself into a jaguar eventually will get stuck in the feline body being unable to return to his human shape. The fixation in the foreign body is commonly talked of as a kind of punishment for the malevolence perpetrated but also for the excessive indulgence in bodily transformation. The faith of these men is as a rule not lamented since they themselves have brought on their bodily metamorphosis through their prolonged contact with the jaguar quality of being. Although the jaguar is both feared and admired, the loss of the human

shape in these instances is considered horrifying, not because these men are stuck in a foreign body but because of the solitary, un-social life of jaguars which is appalling because the men retain their human and social personality.⁹

Not only humans have the capacity to change into the shape of other beings and a number of Matsigenka myths tell about non-human beings, usually spirits and demons, which turn into human shape; there is even a verb, *matsigenkatanake*, which describes this process. In narratives that account for encounters with such transformed beings, it is as obvious as it is crucial for the plot that the non-human beings keep their personal point of view and identity in spite of their human body. This condition is clear in myths such as, for instance, the one that tells of a spider who appears as a human woman in the swidden of a young man who, when they meet, immediately and hopelessly falls in love with her. The man brings spider woman home to where he and his parents live and initially the young man's mother is pleased that her son has found himself a wife who moreover diligently dedicates herself to the spinning of threads all day long. Soon, however, the mother finds her daughter-in-law's monomaniac spinning exaggerated and scolding her she insists that the young woman also engages in the other chores of the household. One afternoon when the young man returns home he cannot find his wife. He asks his mother if she knows anything about the whereabouts of his spouse and she tells him that the young woman has left and that she was happy to see her leave. The man runs out into the forest calling for his wife and eventually he finds her sitting in the middle of the swidden where he first saw her. He entreats her to return home but she replies that his mother cannot accept her as she is and they will therefore never be able to live together. As she makes this remark she disappears, that is, she returns to the shape of a spider. Bereft and desperately longing for his lost wife the young man commits suicide soon after her disappearance.

As in the story about spider woman, encounters with non-human beings that have transformed into anthropoid shape commonly result in negative consequences for those who were born humans. The non-humans who appear in narratives are usually more devious than the spider woman in the story above. Men and women who go out into the forest on their own are known to have met with demons that appear as their spouses or as attractive persons of the opposite sex. If the human person is lured into engaging in sex with the demon, he or she will eventually lose the soul and die. In a similar manner, the many stories that tell of Ináenka, the mother of disease, describe how she appears among human people in the shape of an old woman to spread her lethal influences resulting in devastating epidemics and the demise of a great number of people.

Uncontrolled Transformations

Transformations that are uncontrolled are as a rule accounted for in narratives as more radical than controlled changes which usually mean that an entirely different physical shape is acquired together with a mode of perceiving the world that accords with the new body. In comparison to controlled piecemeal manipulations that go on all the time, uncontrolled transformations are exceptional both with regard to their relatively rare occurrences and their comprehensiveness and, in consequence, they constitute prime material for narratives. Even though the transformation does not have to be considered an act of aggression as the consequences are not necessarily negative, the transformed person is at the mercy of the transforming agent and, besides certain protective measures, little can be done to prevent such bodily changes.¹⁰

In Matsigenka myths that account of uncontrolled corporeal changes, the agents behind the transformations are oftentimes protectors rather than predators. The physical changes may moreover be only temporary and the one who is transformed needs not even be aware of what happened, realising only afterwards what has taken place. This kind of unconscious transformation is a central element in the story that tells about a man who visited a household of snakes without understanding at the time who his hosts were. According to the story, the man is on his way back home after having visited relatives living far away. When night approaches he passes through a part of the forest unknown to him. Luckily he comes upon a swidden from which leads a trail that takes him to a nearby house. The inhabitants of the house greet him and invite him to eat and stay overnight. He is served peccary meat and manioc beer and he eats and drinks well. Before leaving the next morning, his hosts give him a piece of peccary meat to take home. The man sets out and after a while he is back home where his wife welcomes him. He tells her about the people he stayed with overnight and he gives her the meat they gave him. As he extends

the gift of food to his wife, it turns out that it is human flesh and he realizes that he has spent the night together with snakes for which humans appear as peccaries.

In this story, the man is obviously not aware of the corporeal transformation that he has undergone and that makes him perceive the snakes in human form while the snakes see him as one of them. Thus, although snakes eat human flesh, which they see as peccary meat, the man is spared since he at some moment changed bodily shape in the eyes of the snakes. Neither the transforming agent nor the reason for rescuing the man is disclosed in the story.

Another narrative in which bodily transformation plays a central part, that my Matsigenka interlocutors considered to be a happy one, tells the story of a man who initially lives together with his wife and his younger brother. Also in this story the transformation is uncontrolled by the humans involved but in contrast to the story about the man who visited the snakes, the transforming agent acts openly and with obvious motives. According to the story, the man's wife becomes infatuated with her brother-in-law who also is attracted to her and together they devise a plan to get rid of the husband/elder brother. The conniving couple trick the married brother to climb a high tree to gather starling eggs where they leave him without any means to descend. As it dawns upon the deceived man that he has been left in the tree to die, he begins to cry. Suddenly a beautiful woman appears on the branch on which he sits and she invites him to enter her house. Thus, as the starling *cumi* woman addresses him, he has already turned into a starling and accepted the starling point of view of the world which means that he is saved from an otherwise certain death.

The Transformed and the Untransformed

When personal transformations are discussed in the ethnographic literature, attention is paid principally to those who have transformed and to how the world is perceived by them. In Matsigenka myth, these changes are not described as particularly radical from the point of view of the transformed and, as seen in the accounts of the various myths above, the characters seem readily to accept the changes that they have undergone – if they are aware of them at all. Thus, the cuckolded brother in the myth referred to above immediately melts into starling society without any problem since to him this avian world does not differ to any decisive degree from the one he left. The radical changes that people undergo are accordingly apparent only from the view of human spectators while those who are transformed are unaffected to the extent that they even may be unaware of what has taken place (as in the story of the man who visited the snakes). The facility of this social reorientation follows from the common condition that all beings see themselves as humans living in the same kind of society which means that the physical transformation is experienced, when conscious, by the one transformed only as a social one while it is those left untransformed who most significantly experience the physical change. For those transformed, the old social setting is substituted by a new but similar one while those who remain human lose one who used to belong to them and who is not replaced. From the condition that the transformed person's sense of being human is retained it follows not only that the bodily transformation is undramatic to the affected but also that the transformed person experiences no loss of neither identity nor personality (Rosengren 2006a).

Since bodily transformations leave the subjects and their personalities intact, experiences and memories from the past are preserved. Thus, although the cuckolded man's new life together with the starlings is a good one, he keeps on nourishing a desire to revenge himself. Eventually he appears in human shape in front of his deceitful brother and former wife whom he cunningly tells that he has returned to fetch his bow and arrows and that he is well and happy and that he no longer bears any grudge against them. To prove that they are forgiven he gives them a paste based on *achiote* that he says will give them eternal life. However, when the brother and former wife apply the paste it attracts hordes of stinging and blood sucking insects that viciously attack the couple who desperately jump into the river to get away from the menace but in the water they are attacked by fish that eat their flesh and the two die an excruciatingly painful death.

With regard to the significance that some render predation as a motive for transforming other kinds of beings stress is given to producing similarity with the Self. Departing from the perspectives and interests of particular actors the physical transformation of the Other may however be counterproductive to predation. Within Amazon ethnography, it

has been observed repeatedly that the body is an instrument with the help of which persons can mobilize and perform a number of intentional and culturally learned acts, that is, knowledge is embodied. The corporeal body serves in consequence not just as a “lens” through which the surrounding world is perceived, it is also a “tool” that is purposefully used to sustain the Self as well as those who in some way depend on the person’s skills and responsibilities. Even if Kashinahua theories of knowledge’s association with different body parts (cf. Kensinger 1995: 237-46) are matched by few other people, most Amazonians entertain ideas that link the physical body to the faculty of knowing. Non-propositional knowledge, how to do things, is accordingly often linked to the use of the body and its parts. This instrumental quality of the body is of crucial significance in the following myth.¹¹

A man is captured by a herd of peccaries when he tries to scare them away from his swidden. Since the pigs decide to take advantage of the things that the human body allows the man to do, above all climbing trees and palms to harvest the fruit out of the pigs’ reach, he retains the physical shape though he understands the peccaries’ speech and is able to communicate with them. For a start the man is frightened by the pigs and he tries to escape, which turns out to be impossible. In time he accepts his fate and he starts to help the peccaries in their search for food. After some time the peccaries return to their land, which is situated on an island in the middle of a large sea. They bring the man who during their association has become the pigs’ pet. As the company crosses the water that surrounds the island¹² the peccaries have to assist the man carrying him on their backs and for a while the role of subservience is reversed. This role reversal is arguably a manifestation of the mutual dependence that has resulted from the interaction that brings the man and the pigs closer together which subsequently results in the development of mutual trust and the further intensification of social intimacy and interaction. When the company lands on the beach of the pigs’ island the process of blending is completed and the pigs transform in the eyes of their hostage into humans which simultaneously means that he in the eyes of the pigs turns into one of them while from the point of view of fellow humans he turns into a pig. The process of transformation is, accordingly, a phenomenon that experientially is a complex event, the outcome of which depends on the point of view but, significantly, the one who is transformed is the one who personally least experiences the changes. The condition that all the inhabitants of the island become physically similar does not lead to indifference, as the perspectival model of Viveiros de Castro (2004: 19, 2012: 93) suggests. To the contrary, the interaction is socially intensified and it takes on a convivial character. As Rival (2005) argues, gender cannot be left out of perspectival notions and the man establishes in accordance a new family among the peccaries with whom he subsequently leads a full and happy life.

At one point, the man and his new family return to scavenge in what once was his own garden. His former family rejoice when they see him since they recognize him because of his personality which he has retained despite the peccary shape in which they perceive him. In a happy ending, at least from the human point of view, his old family manages to capture him and, speaking with him and treating him as a human, they successively return him into what they consider to be his original human shape.

Even though this narrative principally focuses on the experiences of the man together with the peccaries, there is another side to the story that rarely is accounted for in perspectivist analyses: that of those who have not changed but who remain human. To them, the new situation is more dramatic than for the one who was transformed since they lose a partner which means that they are deprived not only of someone who contributed to the sustenance of the group but also someone near and dear; they are sad and suffer from the bereavement.¹³ The peril of metamorphosis is, thus, not primarily felt by the one who is transformed whose life continues much as before although together with a new set of people. A transformed person is, however, a person who is lost for those who remain and as the missing person blends out of human conviviality and into another sphere of social life his or her social and material contributions are not accessible anymore to those who stay human. In consequence, it is those who are left unchanged who are made to suffer by the changes in *their* lives provoked by the loss of a group member. Moreover, since personhood is intersubjectively formed, the absence also affects the identity and being of those who are left. Thus, in order to understand perspectivism in terms of local comprehensions, corporeal instability cannot merely be treated as a general and abstract principle. Not only is it that a person changes and disappears from the social setting to which he or she has belonged, this loss is also personal and emotionally unsettling for those who remain.

The loss associated with a close person's bodily transformations is similar to the loss experienced when a close person dies. Death is in accordance frequently seen as a form of metamorphosis that commonly is understood as a dehumanising transformation rather than a process of annihilation; to talk with Taylor (1993: 654), the dead become either super-human or sub-human. In contrast to analyses of corporeal transformations, it is evident that in order to understand the everyday significance of death it is necessary to include those who survive. In Amazonia, as elsewhere, relatives and close friends are saddened when someone dies. Among Matsigenka and other Amazonian people, death is not only tragic it is also associated with a strong fear that the deceased, who also is sad and lonely, should try to take someone near and dear along on their way to the land of the dead. People who live in the same household as the deceased consequently tend to stay at home during the first days after the death out of fear of encountering the spirit of the dead who linger in this world with the hope of capturing someone to bring along. The desire of the dead to take someone with them for company is, arguably, not merely the expression of a wish to maintain relations but has to do also with the condition that the state of being always requires a relationship. In order to avoid being "hijacked" in this way, Matsigenka people either bury the dead in places far from the house where the person lived in order to confuse the spirit of the deceased so that he or she will be unable to find the way back or, alternatively, they send the corpse down river to be captured and consumed by the Moon who has a fishing trap somewhere downriver. In communities where people presently are buried in cemeteries, these places are avoided and funerals are quick processes attended only by those needed for the actual burial.

Sociality continues to be of significance after death both as a condition of existence but also as a reflection of the kind of relations maintained during a person's lifetime. The destiny in afterlife is accordingly not uniform; depending on the relationships cultivated with non-human persons during life, one either becomes a super-human or a sub-human. Accordingly, those Matsigenka who have close ties with *saangarite* spirits happily go on their own as they know that a merry and comfortable life awaits them together with their spirit friends. Sorcerers and others who entertain relations with demons go to these after death.¹⁴ In time, after sharing the life of their hosts, dead persons are likely to grow increasingly like the spirits or demons with which they live until they eventually blend into this class of being. In contrast, those who have not sufficiently cultivated bonds with non-human persons end up in the asocial netherworld which in most senses is a gloomy place. Worst of all is probably the condition of asociality and this class of dead people are utterly lonely which is why people fear that the dead will try to bring someone along to the afterlife. The solitude is intensified by the lack of all that which make life worthwhile: meat is both meagre and scarce and no manioc grows which is a calamity since its consumption is essential for maintaining humanity. In other words, conviviality does not exist in the netherworld, not only with regard to fellow humans but to *all* kinds of beings. In the netherworld, afterlife is, accordingly, lived in a social vacuum and the beings there turn with time into sub-human existences.

The miserable destiny of those sad souls who have not established bonds with spirits and demons underscores the existential significance of belonging; to be someone it is necessary to be together with others. Moreover, considering that the Other in Amazonian peoples' identity constructions commonly is a constitutive Other and that the Other, therefore, is part of the Self (Overing 1983-84: 346; see also Santos-Granero 2009a, and Taylor 1996: 207), it is obvious that this non-social existence is dreaded as afterlife is nothing less than the eradication of personhood which most concretely is manifested in the being of *suretsi*¹⁵ which is formed of the dead in the netherworld. The *suretsi* is a ghost that lacks a body and therefore also all personal attributes by which it can be identified, which signifies that the dead turns into a "no-body" both in a literal sense and in the sense of a person without any relations. There are many things to fear in life but to Matsigenka people, this is, arguably, the ultimate horror as it is associated with ending up in a social void. The dread of a non-social destiny in afterlife is not unique to Matsigenka people and similar notions are reported for other peoples of the Amazon (cf. Conklin 2001; Praet 2005; Taylor 1993). In consequence, transformations are as such no major concern in comparison to the possibility of ending up excluded from all social contexts. Intersubjectivity, as expressed in convivial sociality and relational mutuality, is thus of essence for being; to be someone it is necessary to be related to someone in one way or another.

To Be

To be someone, and not just to be, it is essential to live in a social context. To be human it is moreover of essence to be in a human setting within which human acts strengthen and enforce the human identity in the same way that, for instance, the foetus is kept human by the fellow members of the household within which the unborn will see the light of day.

For people to have a “good life” they need to live and behave properly, which means “to live like true humans,” doing human things together with fellow humans in convivial settings. In a subjectified, or animistic, universe, to be signifies the constant “socialisation” with many classes of beings and things that all may influence the individuals’ constitution as part of a dialogical blending process. The quality of humanity is thus not so much about a particular origin or a particular physical shape as it has to do with how each individual relates to the world of which he or she is part. The “humanity” of a particular being is consequently nothing that can be taken *a priori*. To maintain one’s humanity requires a special effort and dedication to being human both by oneself and by those with whom one consorts which basically consists of everyday life with other humans and to behave *in* the human way *within* a human setting.

Notes

1 Viveiros de Castro’s ideas of perspectivism have lately been critically appraised also from other angles, e.g. Ramos (2012) points to the tendency among those who adhere to this perspectivist model to stress similarities producing an impression that the Amazon is a homogenous culture area; Rival (2005) challenges the prime importance given to the opposition between “prey” and “predator” while minimising or disregarding the relevance of sex and gender; Turner (2009), departing from a discussion of the relation between nature and culture and its relationship to Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism, focuses on Amazonian ethnography in which he finds a number of discrepancies in relation to Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivist model. From outside Amazonian ethnography Holbraad and Willemslev (2007) note that Inner Asian perspectivism differs with regard to the symmetry of the Amerindian notion according to which all beings have the potential to transform into all other beings. In Inner Asian perspectival conceptions transformation is vertical and a possibility open only to a few actors, principally shamans, which, they say (2007: 330), is a kind of perspectival understanding that theoretically has not been anticipated by Viveiros de Castro.

2 To illustrate this Viveiros de Castro (1998: 478) mentions that what is blood to humans is maize beer to jaguars, what is soaking manioc to humans is a rotten corpse to the souls of the dead, etc.

3 I believe it is significant that adherents to Viveiros de Castro’s version of perspectivism tend to disregard this intermediary ‘body’. Aparecida Vilaça, for instance, holds a more monistic position and, in accordance, she maintains (2009: 132) that to Amazon people “bodies [are] indissociable from minds and affects, and ... [they comprise] both the perception and the substrate of intersubjective relations.”

4 Johnson (2003: 201) reports that to Matsigenka people it is not only humans who are affected by the transgression of food taboos; the development of crops at the time of planting may also be influenced. Johnson notes (2003: 114) moreover that the same food restrictions that are practiced when there is an unborn child in a household are honoured by girls when they are isolated at reaching puberty which suggests that the effect of transformative influences on person and personality also depends on the one influenced.

5 According to Matsigenka people babies with cleft lips are not killed anymore. However, during the more than 30 years that I have been working among Matsigenka people I cannot remember having ever seen anyone with a cleft lip.

6 The process of ensoulment that results from wearing garments also affects Western style clothes.

7 France-Marie Renard-Casevitz (1980-81: 263) says “La graphie est ici une inscription authentifiée par une présence ... les calligrammes peints ou tatoués sur les corps, animés par la voix des hommes.”

8 Women also take ayahuasca though less frequently but I have never heard of women transforming themselves into jaguars.

9 In contrast to Muinane people in the northwest Amazon among whom perspectival ideas are used to evaluate morally the action and subjectivity of others (Londoño Sulkin 2005, 2012), transformation among Matsigenka people are morally ambivalent. In the case of those who get stuck in a jaguar body, the transformation is seen as a punishment but as in the narratives related below transformations may also be seen as morally both positive and neutral.

10 Also here dietary restrictions are important as protective measures. The meat of, for instance, the red brocket deer (*Mazama americana*) is avoided because of its association with demons which means that the one who eats such meat comes under the deer's influence and will eventually be turned into a demon. The deer can also turn itself into the shape of a man or a woman who will try to entice persons it meets in the forest to have sex with it which will have fatal consequences for the person encountered.

11 I have discussed this myth at some length in another context and for a detailed account of the myth see Rosengren (2006a).

12 In Matsigenka myths the crossing over into different perspectival realities is commonly described as the literal subjection of natural hinders such as, for instance, large waters, unknown tracts of forest, and steep mountains.

13 The end of affective relations is important not only because a household member is lost but also because it means a drawback to the project of creating a good life (Overing and Passes 2000). In accordance Gow (2000) stresses that Piro, or Yine, people associate helplessness with aloneness and Opas (2005: 116) similarly talks about the feeling of insufficiency in families that have lost a member of the household.

14 According to Shepard Jr. (2002: 208) also people who are killed by demons may turn into *kamatsiri*, "ghosts."

15 Commonly this noun appears in its possessive forms, *isure* or *osure*, which can be translated as "his/her spirit" or "soul." Matsigenka people explain *isure* as the faculty of thinking or as one's thoughts. The word's indeterminate form, *suretsi*, Matsigenka people translate into Spanish as "ghost" (*fantasma*).

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